

Things to know about cholesterol-lowering medicine



Heart disease and strokes are often caused by a buildup of fat, cholesterol and plaque substances in the inner walls of your arteries. This buildup causes arteries to become clogged and narrow, reducing blood flow. A blood clot can form in the artery and block blood flow to your heart, causing a heart attack. If a clot forms in an artery leading to or inside your brain, it can cause a stroke.

If you're at high risk for heart disease or stroke, your doctor may prescribe medicine to reduce high cholesterol in your blood stream. Statins are the cholesterol-lowering medications recommended for most patients because they are the only medications that have been directly found to reduce the risk for heart attack and stroke. Your doctor may consider other medications as well, especially if you have serious side effects or don't have an adequate response to statin therapy alone. Closely follow your doctor's treatment plan, including medication, diet and exercise.

Understanding the medication your doctor prescribes to treat your heart disease can be helpful. The following overview explains the basic facts about statins and other cholesterol-lowering medications.

Understand cholesterol-lowering medicines

Your doctor will decide which cholesterol-lowering medications are the best fit for your health needs. Follow your doctor's orders carefully and tell your doctor if you experience any side effects. Never stop taking your medicine unless told to by your doctor.



REMEMBER
Improving your cholesterol lowers your risk for heart attack and stroke.

Types of cholesterol-lowering medicines

Bile acid binders (resins)

Resins work in the intestines to help rid the body of cholesterol. Some names of bile acid binders include cholestyramine, cholestipol and colesevelam. Bile acid binders:

- Come in a pill or powder that you mix with water or juice and take 2-4 times per day.
- Are not absorbed by the body, but instead bind with cholesterol in the gastrointestinal tract and are expelled during elimination.
- Can have side effects such as constipation, bloating, nausea and gas.

HMG-CoA reductase inhibitors (statins)

Some names of statins include atorvastatin, lovastatin, rosuvastatin and simvastatin. Statins are used primarily to lower LDL cholesterol. Statins:

- Work in the liver to prevent the formation of cholesterol.
- Can cause muscle pain or weakness.
- May cause very dark or even brown urine in some patients. You should let your doctor know promptly if you develop this symptom.
- Your doctor may order periodic liver function tests.

Selective cholesterol absorption inhibitors

This is a newer class of cholesterol-lowering agents. Ezetimibe is the only current example of a selective cholesterol absorption inhibitor. This drug:

- Prevents absorption of cholesterol from the intestine.
- Is most effect at lowering LDL.
- Has a modest effect on lowering triglycerides and raising HDL (good cholesterol).

Fibric acids

Fibric acids are good for lowering triglyceride levels. They can also raise HDL cholesterol levels. Some fibric acids include clofibrate, fenofibrate and gemfibrozil. Fibric acids:

- Can cause stomach symptoms in some patients.
- Can interact with a wide variety of other medications. Be sure to tell your doctor about all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines you take as well as any supplements and herbs.
- May not be appropriate for persons with kidney, liver or gallbladder disease.
- May cause muscle pain or tenderness.
- **Note regarding Chofibrate:** The results of the World Health Organization (WHO) study suggest that clofibrate might increase the risk of cancer, liver disease and pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), although it might also decrease the risk of heart attack. The study also suggests it may also increase the risk of gallstones and problems from gallbladder surgery. Other studies did not find each of these side effects. Be sure to discuss this risk with your doctor before taking this medicine.

PCSK9 inhibitors

This is the newest class of cholesterol-lowering agents for persons who have been unable to lower their LDL cholesterol enough with diet changes and statin therapy. These drugs:

- Target and block a specific protein - PCSK9. This blocking action allows the liver to remove more LDL cholesterol from the blood, resulting in lower levels of LDL.
- Are used in combination with diet and the highest tolerated dose of statin medicine.
- Come in one-time use, pre-filled syringes. Injections are done by the patient at home in either two-week or monthly intervals.
- Are expensive and currently require prior authorization by the insurer. You may be eligible for payment assistance from the manufacturer, if needed.

A word of caution!

Some cholesterol-lowering drugs interact with grapefruit and/or grapefruit juice. Please discuss this potential interaction with your doctor.